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‘There is no such thing as a boring place’¹: Architecture and the Built Environment as
a Televisual Experience:

Barry Curtis & Naomi House

The televised ‘architectural documentary’ – is a difficult sub genre to define. It can incorporate monographic accounts of single buildings as well as documentaries in which architecture features as one element in more comprehensive historical or cultural investigations. It comprises numerous home finding and makeover programmes and monographs on the work of signature architects. This essay seeks to offer a broad survey of a range of approaches and ways of analysing and contextualising elements of the built environment. Architecture is a prominent component in imaginative re-creations of the past – such as Mary Beard’s insightful invocations of Pompeii and other Classical sites². The forensic and imaginative investigation of archaeological sites is a kind of paradigm of teasing meanings from structures and accounting for their mutations over time.

The nature of the small screen, until recently, meant that definition was limited and brought with it an assumption that the viewers’ eyes required close direction. The built environment is composed of large objects that need to be seen in totality, and explored in forensic detail. The tele-visualising of architecture ranges from relatively simple lecture formats, with a narrator ordering perceptions, to complex hierarchies of discourse that engage with documents, historical anecdote, dynamic visualisations, fictions and the performance of expertise and opinionisation.

¹ Jonathan Meades in an interview with Tim Adams published in ‘The Guardian’ 19th March 2017.

² *Mary Beard’s Ultimate Rome: Empire Without Limits* (BBC, 2016)

Walter Benjamin suggested that camerawork in film is prescriptive, distracting and disruptive of the aura.³ Where the 'artwork' is usually framed or symbolically isolated, architecture is often inescapably environmental, embedded in a matrix of structures and scapes. The architectural documentary seeks to establish the relationship between the parts and processes inherent in architectural ensembles. In some cases it seeks to reconstitute the 'aura', by singling out significant buildings, in others it demonstrates the contingencies and mutations of the built environment. Inevitably, it is the 'outstanding' structures that compel attention, but the role of the documentary is often to re-enchant the mundane and marginalised.

There have been many analogies of architecture to film - the experience of the 'promenade' and the ability to survey buildings in aggregate in an 'establishing shot' and then to zoom, pan and track, in order to establish relationships and to re-frame and focus on details of structure, texture, ornament and the traces of making. Television dramas, like films, make extensive use of mise en scenes that locate, shape and share the points of view of characters with complex relationships to buildings and interiors that frame and stage human encounters. Reyner Banham made the point that our extensive viewing of architectural narratives in fiction prepares us for encounters with places⁴.

In the examples cited here, the meaning of architecture is supplemented by the manipulation of elements of previous visual experience – tourist vistas, newsreels,

³ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (London: Penguin, 2008)

⁴ *Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles* (BBC, 1972)

fictional dramas and everyday life. The aim of the documentary is frequently to disrupt, or review customary expectations and to foreground marginalised components.

Architecture has conventionally been coded as masculine and interiors as feminine – this binary gendering is frequently played out in the architectural documentary. The role of commentator is almost exclusively fulfilled by men in performances of authoritative proficiency. The commentary incorporates technical insights, a degree of physical engagement, rhetorical questions and confident assertions. Women have been more prominent in programmes on the social implications of interiors. Mary Beard has commented on this ‘awkward relationship between the voice of women and the public sphere of speech-making . . . the fact that women, even when they are not silenced, still have to pay a very high price for being heard’⁵. Of all documentary types, there is something about building – and speaking of structure - that seems ‘naturally’ reserved for men, often as a show of indignant male competence – the pleasure of sharing a well-informed obsessive interest in how buildings are constructed and function.

Although informed by these memorial meta-texts, television documentary have distinctive modes of address. Some take the form of strategically illustrated monologues, such as Adam Curtis’s 1984 documentary, *The Great British Housing Disaster*⁶. Characteristically, the commentator is on screen and establishes a continuity of discursive evaluation accompanying a range of visual points of view,

⁵ Mary Beard, ‘The Public Voice of Women’, *London Review of Books*, vol.36, no.6 (20 March 2014), pp 11-14.

⁶ *The Great British Housing Disaster* (w. Adam Curtis, BBC2 1984)

montage and allusive ‘evidence’ – maps, personal testimonies, excerpts from fictional and nonfictional films. The presence of an on screen witness and guide is vital to narrating histories, drawing attention to significant details and providing, often quite literally, an ‘overview’. The nature of the ‘series’ establishes continuities between discrete episodes. It creates a kind of ecosystem of object relations and anecdotal revelation. The more ambitiously playful and surreal examples of Jonathan Meades’ distinctively mannered and opinionated approach draws the viewer into disruptive complicities that move beyond visual lectures to explore social paradoxes and questions of taste and contention.

There is an extensive literature on cities and film⁷ that demonstrates how films establish a social geography by exploiting visual clues that clarify continuities, repetitions or conflicts. The televised architectural documentary is related to a tradition of ‘city films’ that emerged in avant-gardes in Germany and Russia in the 1920’s. British television programmes are clearly related to the British documentary tradition in film. John Grierson’s observational ‘dramas of the doorstep’ derived elements of montage from the European tradition, but introduced the testimony of people who had direct experience of living in the buildings under investigation. The most obvious antecedent to the television documentary is Edgar Anstey’s polemical *Housing Problems* (1935), incorporating silent footage from an earlier 1928 documentary. Information films like *Proud City* (1945) – an explanation of the thinking behind the ‘Abercrombie Plan’ - are also predecessors of the kind of TV architectural documentaries that first appeared in the 1950s.

⁷ Stephen Barber, *Projected Cities: Cinema and Urban Space* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002).

Architecture requires a wide range of expertise to comprehend the structural, symbolic and social elements of buildings and environments, this expertise is a key element in the pleasure they offer. The commentator, in earlier documentaries⁸ embodies a performative relationship to the landscape and its structures. For the viewer, there is the pleasure of witnessing an exploration and following the commentator's encounter with buildings, mediated by the camera's point of view as it tracks, pans and zooms to follow the narrated argument. An essential feature of architectural documentaries is the ease with which the point of view moves from establishing shots to evidential detail.

The BBC documentary *Six Men-Portraits of Power in a Modern City* (1965) by Philip Donnellan opens with the architect, John Madin in extreme close up talking about the problems of building and planning in Birmingham. The narrative moves between cameos of the architect in his: 'fine modern house', teaching trainees, talking to clients and assistants in his office. The narration establishes the complexity of his role as 'artist and salesman' – explaining the rationale for his buildings with plans and presentations, which invoke Gothic churches, as well as modernism as inspiration. Madin is presented as a successful and 'dynamic' architect, to an extent that BBC received complaints that the unrelentingly positive commentary constituted an advertisement for his work.

The 'architect as hero' approach is more ambiguously presented in *The Smithsons on Housing*⁹. The focus is on the 'Robin Hood Gardens' estate of 214 homes in Poplar (completed in 1972). The programme opens with a high angle

⁸ described in other contributions to this journal.

⁹ *The Smithsons on Housing* (p. B.S. Johnson, BBC, 1970)

tracking shot of the site, before moving to an extreme close up on the face of Alison Smithson (the first female presence in these early documentaries, other than an unidentified assistant in 'Six Men' and Madin's non-speaking wife). She addresses the problem of vandalism that emerges as the documentary progresses: 'we may have to rethink the whole thing, it may be that we should only be asked to repair the roofs and repair the bathrooms of the old industrial houses'. The shots of the building site are accompanied by a voice over that stresses the exceptional nature of their work, the Smithsons' international reputation and their theoretical influence. The Poplar site is their first opportunity to build housing. They emphasise their identification with the project, the importance of apparently trivial signs of life and attachment to locality – of the 'as found ' and the 'poetry of the ordinary'. The camera works to provide visual evidence of the concern for context, using shots of industrial dereliction, moving between aerial points of view and maps. Alison Smithson manipulates fragments of broken china as emblems of the materials that constitute the unique identity of the site. The overcoming of the problem of traffic noise is illustrated by the use of models and sketches, elevations and site photographs. Peter Smithson suggests that they may be building for future generations, rather than the present occupants. There are shots of Hawksmoor churches exemplifying Peter's suggestion that they constitute a model of building 'in the best possible way', irrespective of the conditions of the time, built as Alison puts it: 'to outlast their first users'. The programme conveys a troubled account of architects disillusioned by the apparent mismatch of buildings to tenants. It concludes with Alison commenting on a French plan for comprehensive development for the Provencal coast (Port Grimaud) – 'a quiet more humane living environment'.

Alec Clifton Taylor, an expert on church architecture, was introduced to the BBC by Nikolaus Pevsner in the early 70's. He featured in three series of documentaries, unimaginatively named: *Six English Towns* (1977), *Six More English Towns* (1981) and *Another Six English Towns* (1984). The visual pleasure of these programmes lay in the genial presence of an obvious enthusiast performing, before camera, the work of analysing and appreciating. In the first series, Richmond in Yorkshire is presented through a series of establishing shots, including old prints and a voiceover, reading from an eighteenth century diary. Characteristically, he starts with historic roots and proceeds to establish, with corroborating images, the relations between the location of the town and its industries. The chief attraction of his close attention to the structure of buildings was his comprehensive awareness of the source of building materials, and in particular his knowledge of the composition and provenance of the stones, bricks, tiles and timbers.

The camera adopts Taylor's point of view in the approach to Totnes by train, scanning cliffs of Permian red sandstone that we later encounter as building elements. In Whitby he demonstrates the uses of Jurassic sandstone, carted up steep inclines from quarries and decorated in characteristically local ways. Viewers must have been gratified by his competence and energetic and intimate commentaries, which display an evident pleasure in the textures and uses of the materials. He commends the regeneration of old buildings and the importance of heritage. Most nineteenth century buildings and, in particular Victorian additions to existing buildings are deplored. The coming of the railways saw the eclipse of local traditions and attention is drawn to the cheaper and 'inappropriate' materials that were substituted. Clifton Taylor provides pleasurable excitement in finding a church in Whitby that miraculously avoided

Victorian makeovers. The programmes are pervaded with his indignation at the ‘wretched piece of legislation’ that was the 1972 Local Government Act that left intensively analysed buildings like Totnes Tudor Guildhall without its original function. Perhaps the most distinctive visual characteristic of the three series is the attentiveness of the camera to details of structure and surface as it follows Taylor’s expert analysis of materials and making.

Dan Cruickshank (whose television career began in the 1990s) is similarly attracted to building processes and the materials of construction. He characteristically approaches structures with a conspiratorial sense of discovery, using locations and historical narrations in the pursuit of clues. In *Dan Cruickshank & the Family that Built Gothic Britain* (BBC, 2014) he climbs the massive spiral staircase of the semi derelict St Pancras Hotel – addressing the camera and speaking in theatrical tones of the mysterious death of the architect’s son. The sense of a ‘mystery’ is central to Cruickshank’s analysis of buildings, sustained by an ambulatory forensic investigation that accounts for the present state of the building and dramatizes its past. In his programme on Tyntesfield, in *Britain’s Best Buildings* (BBC, 2002) he arrives by car to enter the abandoned stately home and stealthily investigate a ‘lost world’, animating absent presences and ‘make them speak’. The camera corresponds roughly to his point of view. In the same series his rich historic contextualisation of Harlech Castle is accompanied by a historical reconstruction of conflicts between English and Welsh soldiers, and a sequence in which he constructs his own childhood toy of the castle on a sandy beach. This linking of the exposition to autobiographical and historic events is characteristic of his amiable practice of confiding in the audience and his sympathetic questioning of inhabitants in the role of ‘house detective’.

Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles is a striking example of critic as hero.

Banham was at the time, Professor of Architectural History at UCL, an inspirational lecturer and a prolific writer on all aspects of design and society. Banham brought to this very personal documentary report the ideas that had been developed at the ICA's 'Independent Group' in the mid 1950's - a rejection of hierarchies of taste and an enthusiasm for the iconography and energy of popular culture. He developed these innovative perspectives in essays, radio broadcasts and books, notably: *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (1971). Banham appears at intervals in the film, lecturing in Pasadena – offering unorthodox claims for the greatness of the city of Los Angeles. The hour long documentary extends over a day in which Banham's thesis is expressed and illustrated. His views on the importance of spontaneity and mobility, his affection for the icons of modernity and new technologies, which he termed 'gizmos', and his conviction that the apparent chaos of Los Angeles is a result of trusting people, not experts, are all played out in a journey in which the camera follows his gaze, records him wandering and expounding, and floats above the city, exploring its complex interchanges and bewildering complexity.

The separation of the city into different 'ecologies' is an ordering principle of the documentary and reflects its ambitious integration of architecture with environment, mood and mediation. It opens with the confident bearded figure of Banham leaving L.A. airport and picking up his rental car. A futuristic tone is set by his activation of a fictional, sponsored: 'visitor guidance device - BAEDEK-KAR. Banham's voice over establishes that the guide format will shape the apprehension of the city and suggests a number of disparate destinations – each distinctive but

constituent of the anti urban, 'culturally and socially bankrupt' city which is the object of his 'passion beyond reason'. The viewer is alerted to the unorthodox embracing of the popular by the brightly coloured 'balloon' title graphics.

The narrator appears piloting his Moulton bicycle through Bloomsbury, enabling him to make an analogy with the speculative nature of London squares. Then a pixelated Banham appears as he locates the provisional cinema in Norwich where he saw silent movies that familiarised him with nascent L.A. The motorised point of view lingers on the Watts Towers – a vivid example of unofficial, individualistic creativity, one of the characteristics of L.A. that is universalised in his enthusiastic visual tributes to the aesthetics and ornamentation of custom cars, surf boards and high finish art.

There is a powerful visual emphasis on mobility – the camera watches Banham drive and move whilst 'rubber necking' and soaring above the freeways with the voice of BADEK KAR supplying a naïve counterpoint to his more specific and circumspect commentaries on elements of his 'ecologies' and film locations. In one sequence he performs as a parodic 'private eye' prowling around a typical house to a soundtrack of Bernard Hermann's 'Vertigo Prelude', He appears at breakfast in the Gamble House, which he extols as an archetypal 'bungalow' to Barney Kessel's 'Midnight Sun' and enters the Eames House – as a reverent visitor, whilst the camera prowls around and through the interior to the backing of a Gretry flute concerto. The visual tributes to surfing, Grumann's 'Chinese Theatre', the pervasive mood of Hollywood and the 'electrographic architecture' of night-time neon are accompanied by the Beach Boys, Doris Day, Duke Ellington and the Doors.

Banham has some important, carefully illustrated points to make – the integration of detached dwellings with commercial zones, the deplorable nature of ‘gated condos’ (he is turned away from a suburb by a guard). He acknowledges the creeping refurbishment and gentrification of the bohemian districts of Venice and Malibu and interviews Angelenos who are engaged in what he regards as the important business of ‘doing their own thing’. He calls on ‘local talent’ to celebrate the impermanent architecture of drive-ins and petrol stations. The tour ends with a lyrical vision of the sunset through the windscreen and Banham’s signing off – ‘that great moment of plastic fluorescent spectacle, the sun going down in man made splendour’.

Adam Curtis’s *The Great British Housing Disaster* (1984) is a powerful example of a filmed polemic. It opens with a stark title: ‘Inquiry’, a demolition sequence and images of shattered concrete slabs. The commentary refers to the widespread awareness of social problems relating to systems built housing but focuses on ‘why the buildings were not built properly’. It takes the form of a quasi legal investigation into the circumstances of the sale of ‘packaged’ building systems, hastily constructed, inadequate and short lived. The investigatory structure of the programme calls on a range of witnesses - council representatives, contractors, site workers and unfortunate inhabitants. Curtis sets jaunty, celebratory newsreels against the bleak evidence of cynicism and incompetence. Perhaps the most memorable sequence is a panning shot of a hotel dining room, which comes to rest on T. Dan Smith [Leader of Newcastle Council, imprisoned for taking bribes from a builder in 1974]. Smith evokes the world of local authority corruption, the free dinners and

‘perks’ of high pressure salesmanship in a mise en scene reminiscent of feature films like ‘Room at the Top’¹⁰ and ‘Live Now Pay Later’¹¹

Jonathan Meades, an admirer of the social and architectural insights and the well informed indignation of Iain Nairn, and referred to by one critic as ‘Pevsner in shades’, has developed a distinctive style as a commentator on buildings. His documentaries are constructed in relation to complex ideas, montages, telling details, surreal juxtapositions and delirious lists. The author is embedded in these dramas of exposition. RADA trained Meades, characteristically wearing wide brimmed hats and sunglasses lurks, strides, and confronts the camera in tellingly constructed compositions. He cites a wide range of texts and has a polymathic and surreal imagination. His enthusiasm for the eccentric and sublime is set against populism and ‘psychogeography’ and yet, he deploys an intoxicating range of cultural reference in order to invoke the idiosyncratic attributes of locality. His chief concern is for the social construction and inhabitation of ‘place’. Meades’ earliest architecture series *How it was Done: The Victorian House* (BBC, 1987) opens with builders performing the construction of back-to-back houses. Using actors and historical reconstructions to animate the house as he explores it through detailed point of view camera shots, he constructs biographical narratives of individual builders and investigates how adaptable the houses have proved in the present, as opposed to the inflexibility of post war tower blocks and housing units.

In later series, notably *Abroad in Britain* (1990) Meades deploys a number of visual

¹⁰ *Room at the Top* (Jack Clayton, 1959)

¹¹ *Live Now Pay Later* (Jay Lewis, 1962)

tricks – a wall of images relating to the fin de siècle is removed by two scene shifters to reveal Fitzroy Square as a launching pad for his investigation of the architecture of the late nineteenth century studio, and in *Abroad Again: Father to the Man* (BBC, 2007) – he explores how his own renegade tastes were formed. Meades' presentational style morphs from formal lectures – as in the introduction to *Joe Building* (2006) - to the exploration of peculiar anomalies such as a Stalin theme park. His use of archival material creates a densely textured assemblage of opinionation, montage and quotation. In *Bunkers, Brutalism and Bloody Mindedness* (BBC, 2014), Meades speaks through masks of Anna Wintour and Karl Lagerfeld to denounce fashionableness. The expression of controversial opinion, richly exemplified and delivered with deadpan languor makes for a demanding and pleasurable experience. One reviewer expressed a delight in his 'rhetorical leaps, labyrinthine sentences, unsettling conjunctions'¹²

Meades raises indignation to a new level in his assessment of other architectural ideologues. Le Corbusier is a 'harmful eccentric', Reyner Banham is castigated for his 'matey prose' and for 'stating the bleeding obvious'. Popular perceptions of the 1960's are deemed: 'a kaleidoscope of polychromatic vacuity', and Poundbury is referred to as 'Thomas Hardy Theme World.' Meades' strong opinions are matched by an equally strong aesthetic position – his admiration for the anti-social sublimity of Brutalism, which he terms 'concrete from outer space' is poetic and passionate.

¹² Rachel Cooke, 'Reviewed: The Joy of Essex with Jonathan Meades, *New Statesman*, 7/2/2013, <http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/culture/2013/02/reviewed-joy-essex-jonathan-meades>

In spite of his patrician contempt for ‘mateyness’, Meades deploys similar tropes to Banham. His programmes on Essex and Birmingham¹³ use the strategy of a driver’s point of view - the landscape above the speedometer and radio display. He purposefully diverges from Banham’s ambivalent but energetic deployment of radio commentary by appearing, at one point, to be asleep at the wheel. Meades uses the comic device of parodied local radio to evoke parodic tropes of regionalism. He rehearses clichés in order to expose their fatuity, often with a strikingly discrepant image. He intones clichés about Essex and its inhabitants - ‘surgically enhanced slappers’, ‘footballers’ cast offs’, ‘diamond geezers’, whilst posing dramatically against a sequence of visually extraordinary buildings - ancient churches, grand industrial ruins and the memorials of heroic historic failures.

Despite his sense of outsidership and reservations about the BBC, Meades continues to produce popular television documentaries that elaborate on architecture as a cultural discourse. He observed in a recent interview that: ‘we used to be a convoy, now we are a smart car’. His performative conjuring with archives and perspectives is comparable with Adam Curtis’s sequestered creative persona, orchestrating visual essays and powerful meandering connective commentaries. Architecture is omnipresent, it is the task of narrators to isolate representative or idiosyncratic instances, to call attention to their social significance, to account for origins and adaptations and relate them to wider contexts of understanding. Architecture is unavoidable as the *mise en scene* of everyday life, as a source of material ‘clues’ that reveal aspects of the past and as a complex testimony to political currents, status and taste.

¹³ *Heart By-Pass: Birmingham* (BBC2, 1998), *The Joy of Essex* (BBC4, 2013).

Where previously television has represented architecture as relatively static, recent exemplars have begun to utilise new technologies, which document and reveal architecture to be continually in flux. The BBC short series, *Italy's Invisible Cities* (2017)¹⁴ employs point scan technology to reconfigure our understanding of Naples, Venice and Florence. Rather than rely on the commentary of the presenter to construct a portrait of these historic environments, the focus is on their re-composition as digitally rendered three-dimensional environments that can be navigated and manipulated as miniature replicas, or as 1:1 virtual experiences. Although the series is fronted by Dr Michael Scott (a Classicist) and Alexander Armstrong (a TV presenter and comedy actor), understanding is generated by the technology itself and its ability to bring into view hidden dimensions of these cities that are otherwise impossible to see or gain access to. The privileged commentary of the presenter has been usurped by the ability of these new technologies to mobilise insights and democratise architectural experiences.

In spite of the many ways in which buildings call attention to themselves, their complexity, histories and material composition still require detailed exposition and the synthetic and dynamic visualisations that television documentaries provide. As the role of architects becomes more complex, cybernetic and presentational, documentaries have reflected a new attention to lifestyle, 'the internet of things' and the curating of the home. It is possible to see a new articulation of tourism, current affairs and entertainment in programmes such as *Travel Man: 48 hours* (Richard Ayoade, BBC4, 2015 -) and Simon Reeve's travel documentaries (*Turkey*, BBC2,

¹⁴ *Italy's Invisible Cities* (BBC1, 2017).

2017) which focus on buildings as documents that signify locality and change.

Perhaps this is testimony to the permeable and elastic boundaries of the genre - located between a fascination with the comforts of home, the intricacies of taste, the ingenuity of materials and techniques and the wider claims of genealogy, politics and the environment, and culture in its multitudinous guises.